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They claim the color of shame

Group's green Bloomsday attire brings attention to mental illness

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Ryan Oelrich, Sybrina Cardinale and Alex Stewart, of Youth 'N Action, will wear green for Bloomsday.



For information

To learn more about the Youth 'N Action program, see www.youthnaction.org or call (866) 898-6013.

On the Web: Listen to Alex and Tammy Stewart talk about some of the misconceptions about epilepsy at spokesman.com/audio.

Alex Stewart, 14, will be doing Bloomsday today with his face painted green. He'll hand out green "Empower" wrist bands and spread this message: Kids with mental health issues never need to walk alone – in Bloomsday or through life.

Stewart, who has epilepsy and an accompanying mood disorder, will be joined by other young people in his Youth 'N Action group. "This group helps me realize I'm not the only person in the world with epilepsy," he said.

Youth 'N Action members range in age from 14 to 24. They face mental health challenges such as depression and bipolar, obsessive-compulsive and attention-deficit disorders, either in their own lives or because a friend or family member struggles with mental illness. Ryan Oelrich, director of Youth 'N Action in Eastern Washington, said 12 to 15 group members will be "running green" today because two centuries ago, mentally ill people sometimes were splashed with green coloring to warn others away.

Sybrina Cardinale, 16, will be walking Bloomsday wearing a green hat and a green plastic flower lei around her neck. She's a member of Youth 'N Action because her mother and brother have bipolar disorder and another brother has attention-deficit disorder.

"Youth 'N Action helps me understand where they are coming from and why and how to handle it, rather than just get angry with them when they have mood swings," she said.

In an interview Saturday, Stewart and Cardinale seemed at ease talking about mental illness. The adults listening in, including Stewart's mother, Tammy Stewart, marveled at how far society has

come. For instance, in 1977, the year of the first Bloomsday race, mental illness was still in society's shame closet.

The 1980 movie "Ordinary People" took an unwavering look at teen depression and suicide, but it wasn't until the late 1980s and the 1990s that several high-profile people started telling their stories about struggles with bipolar disorder and severe depression. Books by actress Patty Duke ("Call Me Anna") and writer William Styron ("A Darkness Visible") helped generate a cultural dialogue about hidden mental illness in families and communities.

The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that between 7 million and 12 million children and teens struggle with mental illness. Both Stewart and Cardinale acknowledge that stigma and stereotyping still exist. Stewart, bullied since elementary school, says it has followed him into high school. "They punch me," he said. "They push me into lockers."

Cardinale heard about Youth 'N Action through a middle-school counselor. Stewart's mother heard about it through an epilepsy issues newsletter. The green runners today hope other Bloomsday participants notice their green-painted faces, hats and leis and ask why they wear green. These young people have some answers ready.

"If there's one thing I hope youth come away with it's that they are not alone," Oelrich said.

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